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WHITE-THROATED SWIFTS AT CAPISTRANO

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

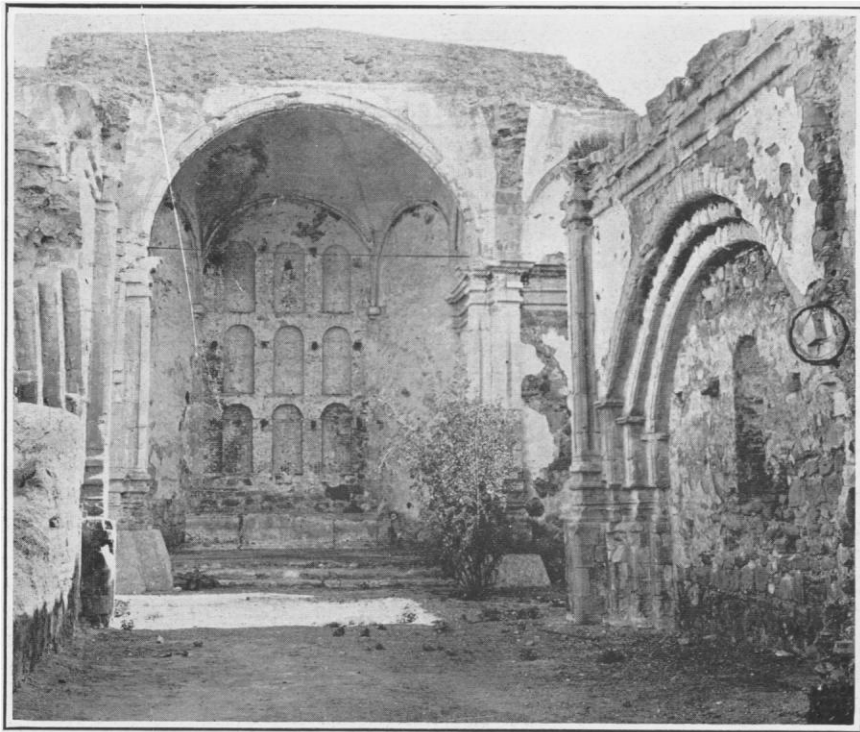
THE only swifts we had seen during a month's field work in California had been in the San Jacinto Mountains where, as usual, the birds were circling among high cliffs; but when, toward the middle of July we reached Capistrano, in passing the ruins of the famous mission to which our eyes turned involuntarily, our steps were arrested and we exclaimed in amazement, for circling about over the interesting old walls, mixed in among a large flock of eave swallows were a few White-throated Swifts (*Aeronautes melanoleucus*). Tho few they were easily picked out from the nondescript swallows by their clean-cut cross-bow forms patched with white.

Their wild, shrieked-out notes recalled canyons walled with rock in the depths of the mountains and we marvelled that the birds should stop even in passing at such a place as this. For altho the mission is a ruin, part of it is still in use and the old green mission bells still clang loudly when the priest comes; moreover, while surrounded by a sleepy Mexican village the mission stands on the automobile highway between Los Angeles and San Diego over which whizzing touring cars toot at all hours, and still worse, twenty rods away the Santa Fe trains whistle and puff and rumble over their tracks. As we watched the Eave Swallows (*Petrochelidon lunifrons*) whose nests line many of the mission arches we wondered if the presence of their large colony had not given encouragement to the swifts, had not made it easier for this little band of cliff dwellers to decide to take up their abode among men.

That they had taken up their abode in the Mission of course remained to be proved, but the old ruin suddenly took on new interest—tell it, or not, to the archeologist—and was explored with one eye to the dim historic past and one eye to the vivid, living, ornithological present. To think of having White-throated Swifts in a *building*—even a ruined one—where you could watch them close at hand! The nearest approach my lucky star had previously vouchsafed had been at the foot of the sandstone cliffs of Acoma where, high overhead, belittled black figures had been seen squeezing into cracks in the rock.

In looking for the birds' nests we followed down the long colonnades whose beautiful arches with their deep shadows attract the photographers and whose richly tinted old walls afford subjects to rouse the enthusiasm of colorists, but they revealed no ornithological treasures, and a dusky old deserted chapel that was entered proved only the home of the barn owl seen when mousing for her squealing young at bat-hunting time. As she flew from her attic—an ancient choir loft?—and flapped out thru a window into the ungrateful light of day we passed on, to enter at last the main old chapel whose bell tower had fallen in during the earthquake of 1812.

As it was now open to the sky it was a good place to watch from, and seated on a block of the fallen wall I looked up at the swifts circling around among the



CHAPEL, AT CAPISTRANO WITH EAVE SWALLOWS' NESTS UNDER ARCHES, AND
WHITE-THROATED SWIFTS' NEST AT END OF SIDE ARCH
(Site Marked by Circle)

eave swallows, at one time seeing a buzzard's big dark figure above the rest. The swifts darted around thru the sky at such lightning speed it was hard to keep track of individuals, but ten were finally told off, in sight at one time.

When they were circling about, their notes had the metallic vibrant quality and the delightful tang peculiar to them, but when they set to on rapidly vibrating wings to chase after each other they gave a common swift-like twitter.

At their slowest it was hard to tell just what they did with their wings except when they set them for soaring, but once both wings seemed held high above the body for a moment, and in rapid running the two appeared to be used alternately as those of the common swift seem to be at times.

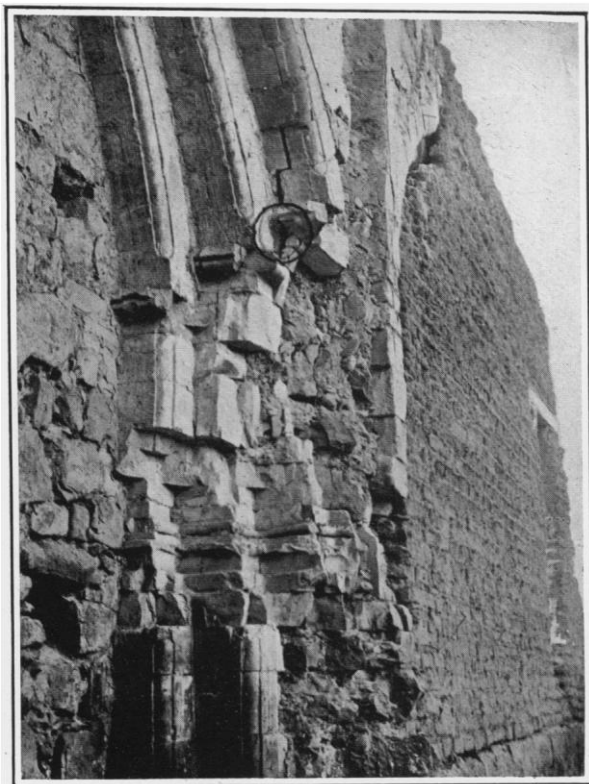
While I sat watching the birds up in the sky suddenly down between the roofless walls a swift came dashing toward me to turn with a loud call and disappear up an earthquake crack at the end of a stone arch only a few yards away. The loud sibilant voices of clamorous young told what happened next. On coming out the old bird apparently discovered that she was watched, and it was some time before she came again. When she did, she came silently but flew bravely straight to the nest. The cries of hungry young being fed just out of sight in wings of the chapel—sacristies—led to the discovery of three other nests or, strictly speaking, occupied earthquake cracks.

The nest behind the end of the stone arch was the only one seen and this—as it was ten feet from the ground—only by climbing and peering up the crack. The crack, as seen in the photograph, was behind the capitol of the pilaster on which one end of the arch rested, the capitol having been jarred away from the wall by an earthquake—doubtless that of 1812. About ten inches up this crack the nest could be seen tightly wedged in between walls less than two inches apart. As well as could be seen without destroying the nest, it was made of bark, feathers, grass, and wool.

The entrance to one of the other nests was a small square hole at the lower end of an irregular earthquake crack that began at the top and ran down to about fifteen feet of the ground, and was discovered by seeing the old bird fly swiftly across to the wall, linger a second before the hole and then disappear inside. The weaker voices of the young at this nest argued that they were not so old as those at the end of the arch.

The two other nests were in chinks between stones of the cornice, about thirty feet from the ground. At one of these the white front of the old bird was strikingly in evidence as it squeezed out from the nest.

The old swifts quickly got used to spectators and tho coming and going silently, darted by at close range. As they approached, the snowy whiteness of the throat and breast, apparently tapering to a V, held the eye, and as they went by, the white rump patches seemed almost as striking a mark. One of the high cornice birds once passed out with a downward swoop so close to my ear it seemed



ENTRANCE TO SWIFTS' NEST AT END OF ARCH
(Marked by Circle)

to roar by. A black cat that walked into the chapel was surprised by a similar—passage of arms?

The cat might well have been attracted to the old ruin as a hunting ground, and had the swifts wanted other avian associates they would not have lacked for them. For besides the eave swallows whose nests lined some of the arches of the chapel, there were many visitors. Barn owl pellets strewn the chancel floor showing that the occupants of the loft beyond frequently stopped in passing. Humming-birds whizzed in to feed from the long yellow tubes of the tobacco tree standing at the foot of the chancel, and brown chippies hopped about as if realizing that their presence was needed to complete any California assemblage. A harsh-voiced kingbird and a gentle black phoebe were seen perching on top of a roofless wall, while a mocker, as usual wholly unconscious of his flippancy lit airily on the cross of the restored chapel.

But while enjoying the feathered visitors who seemed so much at home about the ruin, I had not learned the last word concerning the residents. The nests of eight of the ten swifts actually counted had been placed, but there remained at least one pair of birds still to be located, and the colony might well have numbered more than ten. The best places on the inside walls had been examined but the high outside walls of the chapel in whose chinks tobacco trees had taken root at various levels afforded abundant nesting sites, and before leaving I made a hurried examination of them, forcing a way thru the high thicket of brown cockle burs at their base.

A house wren whose brood was in the weeds below was overhead hopping jauntily along a row of eave swallow nests decorating a cornice, and glimpses were had of visiting artists at work in picturesque corners, but the swifts were little in evidence that morning, perhaps because the priest had come to the village—called to administer the Last Sacrament to a dying Mexican—and there had been a great ringing of bells and early mass at the little chapel a stone's throw from the swifts' part of the old Mission.

Whatever the reason, the only members of the colony seen were on the wing. But they were worth wading thru cockle burs to see. They were on the way to the chapel nests but instead of flying straight to them, to my surprise, circled completely around the outside walls of the chapel before entering! Apparently they had come at such a high rate of speed that it was easier to slow down gradually and to fly in on a curve. It was interesting and characteristic, for tho the swifts when flying more slowly sometimes change direction with a jerk, when going fast they generally circle in large curves.

Tho convinced that there were probably more nests to be found in the outside walls if I could but watch long enough, trains do not change schedules for lagging ornithologists, and my time was up. Turning away from the Mission absorbed in thoughts of the present I was startled by the vision of a tall Franciscan in long gown and Friar's hood, crossing to the chapel—like a ghost from Capistrano's historic past. Even then, however, while pausing to look back upon the wonderful old ruin with its arched chapels and beautiful colonnades, my chief regret was that I must leave without further study this home of the White-throated Swifts.

Washington, D. C.